



NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ENGINEERING

2101 CONSTITUTION AVENUE, N.W., WASHINGTON, D.C. 20418

Committee on
PUBLIC ENGINEERING POLICY

December 4, 1969

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
Stanford Medical Center
Stanford, California 94305

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

We have been asked by several interested groups to consider arranging a conference on public risks created by technological growth. We are now trying to identify individuals who have begun to study risk in a systematic way and who might speak on the subject.

Conferees might draw together information which would help answer such questions as: What are the problems common to all areas of risk assessment? Where do carefully worked out risk policies already exist? What aspects of individual and social life, and the environment, are in fact jeopardized ("risked") when technological change occurs? What data, skills, institutions, and methodologies exist for risk assessment?

Careful evaluation of public risks is needed in a rapidly increasing number of areas. Those most frequently mentioned include automobile and air transportation, nuclear power, processed foods, pesticides, drugs, medical implant devices, flammable fabrics, and household consumer items.

In the enclosed article I made a tentative attempt to express socially accepted risk levels in terms of available historical fatality records. I would be most happy to hear from you about similar (or dissimilar) approaches that you, or others whom you know, have made to this subject. Publications, ideas, criticisms, etc., are eagerly sought. I wonder if you might also indicate whether you are interested in joining a small group for a one or two day conference on risk. If a suitable group can be assembled, the National Academy of Engineering may desire to host the discussion.

Sincerely yours,

Chauncey Starr
Chairman

FA/mp

Enclosure

P.S. Your column in the November 29 issue of the Washington Post on additives was most interesting from the point of view of risk.